

HIDDEN CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Universities ceremonially celebrate the success and pay less attention to dropouts and non completers. It is a general scenario that, universities in the world experience a high rate of non completion among the Doctoral research students, which will have a high impact on the university and the individual students. A major study is being carried out by the author of this paper on 'International students studying at universities in Malaysia are at risk', with a sample of 300 PhD students selected from two state universities and two private universities in Malaysia, which included completers and non completers who had registered for Doctoral Research Program. This paper attempts to analyse some of the findings of a pilot study conducted as a part of the major study with 30 PhD students and debates whether the non completion is an individual problem or the Institution also have a role to play in their success. Further, the paper intends to suggest some strategies to mitigate the risk.*

Keywords: *Doctoral research, non completion, success, risk factors, mitigation of risk*

INTRODUCTION

Drop out and non completion has become one of the phenomenons which have more attracted current researchers, as it is considered a lost for the students and a challenge to the institution for its existence. More attention was paid to school and university undergraduate drop-outs for nearly one century. Now the universities pay more attention to the dropout of post graduate students. For almost five decades the overall rate of doctoral students attrition in US consistently been estimated to be around 50% (Lovitts,2004),doctoral completion rate in Australia is 65% (Martin,2001), in UK around 71% complete in seven years, but only 19% complete in five years, within the speculated period. Hence, it has become a central issue in higher education. As a result higher education institutions give supreme importance to drop out and completion of doctoral students and allocate more funds to overcome the problem. Due to flow of intake of international students to universities the international market has become very competitive. Hence, researchers turn their focus towards incompleteness of international students to completers, who are at the verge of dropout and factors contributing to this behaviour and recommend measures to prevent it; which will save millions going waste, and consequently result into loosing market for postgraduate students. The major focus of the study will be on international students, reading for Doctoral research degrees in universities in Malaysia.

RELATED STUDIES

In an early review, Church (1982) identified loneliness, homesick, depression, arrival confusion, maintenance of self esteem, somatic complain, family problems, time pressure, adjustment of food and climate, finance and employment to be major problems facing international students. In brief most of studies establish individual factors, which influence on student's completion behaviour. In addition, some researchers focused their attention to social factors; some external factors outside and inside the university which influence their study. Hull (1979), walker (1999) indicate lack of contact with national and local community was a problem in all the countries. In contrary, Lovitts (2001) of the view that faculty has a myth about non-completers. She established that those who depart were equal intellectuals as those who finished and their undergraduate performance were also same. Further she argues academic failure or students disposition variables are not a tenable explanation for attrition and concludes if the faculty take credits for partial success (2010) sates primary reason for completion is the link with the supervisor. Proper advice can often spell the difference between the completers and non-completers. Similarly an ISB (international student's Barometer) survey (2008) found international students are satisfied with domestic situations and quality of programmes, but they are not satisfied with feedback they receive from the teachers, about their performance. In a study in New Zealand (Andrew butcher, 2002) reported overseas students receive insufficient support from universities. Similarly, research done on international students in Malaysia, Ariyapala and Edzan (2002), Abdoulay(2003), and Satahieh & Singh(2007) found incoming students face often barriers associated with information acquisition, specially from library. Most of the above studies focus on individual problems and their inability to adjust to the situations and problems faced in acquisition of information in the university. These studies neither paid attention to student's satisfaction nor how the university environment encourages the students to proceed with their studies. Hence, more studies on, how the student's characteristics and skills interact with the university environment, has become mandatory to prevent large number of students leaving from the universities.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

Students bring pre-determined variables when they enter, which affect their activities in the university. But the university is not responsible for this and also can do little to promote the situation. In contrast, students, international students in particular, enter universities with deficiencies or in-competencies in certain skills which are required to complete the research studies, are well known by institutions before and after the admission. The institution has to play a big role in developing these basic competencies which are instrumental for their success. On these assumptions the researcher selected three categories of variables; dispositional variables, intervening variables (alterable variable) and institutional variables. Under dispositional variables (predetermined variables), student's characteristics, such as, age, gender, civil status, country, and language and, under socio economic status, pre-education qualification, income and family background are considered.

Study skills, research skills, language skills, social skills, time management skills and resiliency skills are considered as intervening variables which support the students to interact with the institutional environment. These variables can be altered by the support given by the institutions. Third category, institutional variables included student support and teaching and learning environment in the university. To test the influence of these factors on the non-completion behaviour of the students a questionnaire with nine sets of variables was constructed. A five point Likert scale was developed to measure the student's responses. The questionnaire was piloted with a small sample of 30 doctoral students: 20 non completers and 10 completers, to get an insight to design the major study.

PATTERNS OBSERVED

It was observed that the age of the students registered for PhD degree in different universities, ranges from 30-50 and low percentage of students falls under the age group 30 and more than 50 years. High percentage, more than 60% of them were found belongs to age group between 30-40 years. But a gender difference was not shown in the results. Further, a substantial number of students who have enrolled from overseas countries were offered scholarships and hold academic positions. They have been educated in their native languages and only few of them have completed their Master degrees in English medium before they joined the universities in Malaysia. Malaysia has been preferred for higher studies by majority of the overseas students for cultural and religious reasons. They also stated, the degrees conferred by universities in Malaysia are recognized worldwide and it is offered at a lowest cost. Comparison of mean values of the each set of variables between completers and non-completers shows a slight difference in the competency of the following skills, such as language skill, time management skills, social skills, resiliency skills, research skills and study skills. It was also observed an association between non-completion and these variables. But no difference could be observed in their level of confidence they had in completing the degree. However, their level of confidence decreases and their level of feeling to do away with the course increases with the duration they take to complete the degree. The pattern was found similar to both the groups, completers and non-completers. Trying out the questionnaire with a large sample may establish a significant relationship between the selected variables and non completion and also the different effects, these variables have made on completion and non completion behaviour of the students.

CRISIS IN MALAYSIA

The samples collected for the study on non completers, among doctoral research students, indicates that Malaysia also faces a severe hidden crisis in higher education, similar to other developed countries. Sample was collected from different four universities, consisted of private and state universities, from different faculties, found that non completion among local students (60%) is higher than the overseas students (28%) and non completion rate among the PhD students are higher than the Master degree research students. In the selected universities in Malaysia, it was identified 30% of the students are non completers, this excludes the

students already dropped out from the program. Those who awarded degrees in 2011 by these universities, also have not completed within the specified period, and taken more than 7 years to complete the degree. As a major competitor for overseas students market, Malaysia has to pay immediate attention to face the situation. The proposed study may help to identify the causes for non completion. The study also attempts to test an intervention model, given bellow, to mitigate the risk. (Figure 1)

Deficiency Intervention - A Conceptual Model

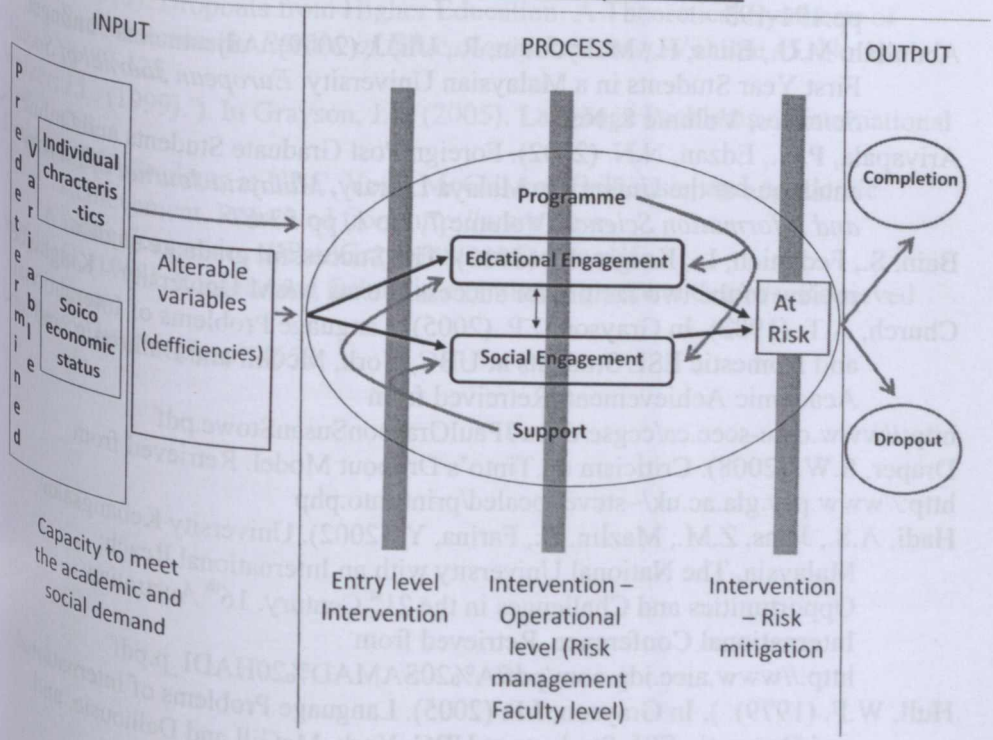


Figure 1

This model has to be tested by tracking a large number of students, from entering to the finishing point. However, a comprehensive study on how international students are monitored after admission and continuously supported by the universities in Malaysia has become a prerequisite to formulate strategies to overcome the situation.

CONCLUSION

A survey conducted by the author of this paper, among PhD students, registered at four different universities in Malaysia revealed, a high percentage of students did not complete degrees they have registered for. The researcher hypothesised that, 'deficiency of skills required to complete the research study have a major influence in this phenomena'. A pilot study conducted among a small group of students has given an insight to test the hypothesis with a large sample. Two major issues

aroused from the survey and the pilot study, are the needs for an appropriately conceived wide survey and an inbuilt mitigation system to prevent risk at individual universities. Further a conceptual model of intervention also has been proposed in the paper, to be tested with a wider sample.

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